The Peter Plan

Part 3 of 5 – The Sin Against the Holy Spirit

Dear friends in Christ,

Are all sins equal in God’s eyes? Most WELS Lutherans would probably answer, “Yes.” We understand, **“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:22,23). There is no difference between one who steals and one who slanders. There is no difference between a prostitute and a pastor. All “fall short of the glory of God” and therefore are in equal need of a Savior. The understanding that all sins are equal is good. It prevents us from becoming self-righteous, looking down our noses at those who are “worse” than we are. It also prevents us from despair when we realize our sin is particularly great. Jesus died for that “great” sin too.

However, Jesus himself taught that in a sense *not* all sins are equal. He said, **“I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven”** (Matthew 12:31). This “unforgivable sin” is sometimes called “the sin against the Holy Spirit.” Why is it that this sin “will not be forgiven?”

* It *is not* that this sin is worse than all others.
* Is *it not* that God does not desire to forgive all sin.
* It *is not* that Jesus’ blood was not shed for all sin.

Rather, it is the nature of the sin itself. The sin against the Holy Spirit is a conscious and unrelenting opposition to the saving work that the Holy Spirit performs through the means of grace.

Saving faith, like a fire, needs to be fed. The Holy Spirit keeps faith alive in only one way—through the gospel. **“Faith comes from hearing the message”** (Romans 10:17). If a person pulls away from the gospel his faith will grow weak. Eventually, it will die. The believer becomes an unbeliever. If this person, who knew the sweetness of the gospel, becomes persistently and maliciously opposed to Word and sacrament, there may be no coming back. He has committed “the unforgivable sin,” because he has consciously, persistently, and maliciously rejected the way that God forgives sin—through the means of grace.

You may be worried. *“I have not always appreciated God’s Word the way I should! Have I committed the sin against the Holy Spirit?”* Let your hearts be at rest! If you had committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, you would be so hard-hearted that you would not be concerned about such things. The fact you are concerned about it proves you have not committed the sin against the Holy Spirit.

You may be worried about someone else. “*A friend of mine was removed from church membership. Has he committed the sin against the Holy Spirit?”* Not necessarily. Removal from membership or even excommunication is not the same thing as the sin against the Holy Spirit. A person who has been excommunicated may still repent and be saved. A person who has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit never will repent, for he has hardened his heart completely.

The point is, the sin against the Holy Spirit *begins* with rejecting the work that the Holy Spirit does through his Word and sacraments. And that is why we are implementing *The Peter Plan*.

Perhaps, when you read that your congregation is going to keep track of how often people are in contact with God’s Word, there was a part of you that bristled. *“Are they going to track every time I say a bad word? Are they going to ask me how many beers I had this week?”* If you thought like that, realize the thought flowed from your sinful nature, which wants to be able to sin without consequence.

However, the explanation of why *The Peter Plan* focuses on worship attendance (and not other aspects of sanctified Christian behavior) is simple. All sins—impure speech, drinking too much, etc.—are washed away in Christ’s blood and completely forgiven. But the sin that *isn’t* forgiven is when one persistently, consciously, and maliciously rejects the way the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith. That is the sin against the Holy Spirit. And the conditions for this sin to occur are ripe when a person persistently withdraws from worship.

*The Peter Plan* shows great love by trying to prevent anyone from slipping into the one sin Jesus says, “will not be forgiven.”